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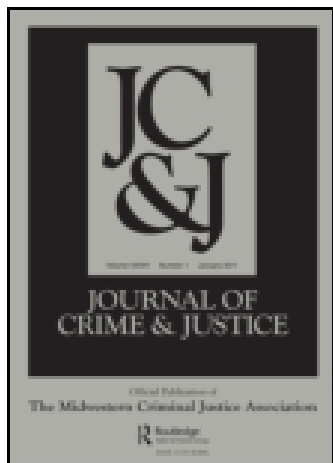
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THE NEWS VALUE OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN VICTIMS: AN EXAMINATION OF THE MEDIA'S PRESENTATION OF HOMICIDE*

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the presentation of homicide in the news. Police data for all homicides occurring in Indianapolis in 1995 were collected. We then electronically searched and then collected all articles about these homicides presented in the city's major newspaper. We used several analysis to determine what characteristics (e.g., number of victims, sex, race) resulted in stories receiving more attention (more articles, more words). Results indicate that murders of white victims receive more attention in the news than murders of African-American victims. The implications for the devaluation of African-American victims are discussed.

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INTRODUCTION

There is a large body of empirical research examining whether the death penalty is imposed in a discriminatory manner. Although research indicates that African American defendants are disproportionately sentenced to death, the effects of race are less pronounced or disappear when controlling for other factors (Baldus, Woodworth, and Pulaski, 1990; Ekland-Olson, 1988; Kleck, 1981; Radelet, 1981; Ralph, Sorenson, and Marquart, 1992). The influence of the race of the victim, however, is quite clear. Defendants who murder white victims are significantly more likely to receive the death penalty than defendants who murder African-Americans (Arkin, 1980; Baldus et al., 1990; Bienin et al., 1988; Bowers and Pierce, 1980; Ekland-Olson, 1988; Gross and Mauro, 1984; Keil and Vito, 1989; Nakell and Hardy, 1987; Paternoster, 1983, 1984; Radelet, 1981; Radelet and Pierce, 1985; Ralph et al., 1992; Smith, 1987). Ralph et al. (1992:201-202, 207), for example, found that the victim's race was the primary extralegal variable affecting death penalty sentencing decisions, and "jurors perceived interracial killings of Anglo-Americans as much more serious than intraracial homicides." The extant research supports the conclusion that there is victim based discrimination in the imposition of the death penalty, and, in general, society tends to devalue the lives of African American victims.

It is important to examine whether African American victims are also devalued in the media because of the public's heavy reliance on news for crime and criminal justice information (Graber, 1980; Skogan and Maxfield, 1981). Some research suggests that the biases presented in newspaper reporting might also determine public opinion biases about crime (Ditton and Duffy, 1983; Kappeler, Blumberg, and Potter, 1996; Sheley and Ashkins, 1981; Smith, 1984). It is not that the press determines what the public thinks, but it does have an impact on what the public thinks about (Cohen, 1963). According to McCombs (1994:4), "Not only do the news media largely determine our awareness of the world at large, supplying the major elements for our pictures of the world, they also influence the prominence of those elements in the picture!"

Although documenting the presentation of race in the news is important to understanding the devaluation of African American victims in the criminal justice system, there has not been much research in this area. It has been difficult to determine how race affects the decision making processes of news personnel because it is not typically identified in

newspaper stories (Campbell, 1995; Chermak, 1995). This study overcomes this limitation by examining the presentation of victims and defendants in the news when the race of both is known from other data sources. We examine how the homicides known by a police department for one year are presented in a metropolitan newspaper. Specifically, this study examines whether homicides involving African American victims are given less attention in the news compared to homicides involving white victims.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The media's role in the racial unrest of the 1960s was examined by the National Commission on Civil Disorders (e.g., the Kerner Commission). The staff report entitled *Violence and the Media* discussed how the media are an important source of intergroup communication because of the geographical and political isolation between races (Lange, Baker, and Ball, 1969). There were many conclusions presented in this report, but the gross underrepresentation of minorities in the news was one of the issues stressed. When discussing media coverage of the African American community, the Commission concluded that news personnel "are capable, qualified, and willing to learn the skills necessary to provide adequate coverage. Too few publishers and broadcast owners, however, are willing to let them do it" (52). Among the many recommendations of this report was to increase the amount of space provided to issues that affect African-Americans.

Contemporary media critics contend that the media images of African-Americans have not improved. Research indicates that minorities continue to be largely ignored or stereotyped in the news media (Campbell, 1995; Chaudhary, 1980; Dares and Barlow, 1990; Entman, 1990, 1992, 1994; Gist, 1990; Gray, 1989; Martindale, 1990a, 1990b; Pease, 1989; Poindexter and Stroman, 1981; Roberts, 1975). An examination of news coverage of minorities before and after the Kerner Commission report found that images of minorities have not improved since 1965, and the problems and triumphs of African American communities continue to be ignored (Pease, 1989:34). Similarly, Campbell (1995) examined the racial myths presented in local television news, finding that minorities and minority communities are virtually ignored by the news media. He argued that the lives of minorities are marginalized because of their omission from the news (Campbell, 1995:57).

When African-Americans are presented in the news, the dominant image is as a criminal (Campbell, 1995; Roberts, 1975), and there has been some research focusing on the presentation of race in crime stories (Entman,

1990, 1992, 1994; Fedler and Jordan, 1981). Entman (1994), for example, examined the images of African American defendants in network television news. He found that television crime stories depict African-Americans as being more dangerous and threatening than whites. Entman discussed how the majority of crime stories depicted African-Americans committing violent or drug crimes, but these crimes comprised a minority of offenses committed by white criminals (Entman, 1994:512).

Another study by Entman (1992) of local television news in Chicago produced similar results. He found that compared to whites, African-Americans were less often named, less likely to be defended in the story, more likely to be pictured in custody, and more likely to be connected to violent crimes. He concluded that the images presented are likely to stimulate negative opinions about African-Americans (Entman, 1992:349). Entman's research focused on the presentation of African American defendants in television news. Research examining the presentation of race in newspaper crime stories has produced very different results (Fedler and Jordan, 1981). Fedler and Jordan's (1981) examination of an Orlando newspaper produced no evidence of bias in the coverage of African-Americans and whites.

Other research examining the general presentation of crime stories provides additional insight into how minorities are portrayed in the news (Chermak, 1995; Humphries, 1981; Johnstone, Hawkins and Michener, 1994; Jones, 1976; Mawby and Brown, 1984; Sheley and Ashkins, 1981; Smith, 1983; Wilbanks, 1984). These studies discuss the presentation of race when examining the types of crime and other demographic characteristics presented in crime stories. For example, Chermak's (1995) analysis of local newspaper and television crime stories examined the presentation of victims. Although the focus of this research was on the media's presentation of crime victims, Chermak also examined the presentation of race. He found that white victims and white defendants were more likely to be provided primary space in newspaper and television news, and concluded that reporters were desensitized to African American victims (Chermak, 1995:79-80). Similarly, Humphries (1981:200) found that newspapers presented minority offenders and victims only in illegitimate statuses.

The extant research examining race in crime stories is limited for several reasons. First, the conclusions have been generated primarily from the examination of media content. Whether the news media distort racial images is determined by comparing media content to some estimate of the incidence of crime such as the *Uniform Crime Reports* or *National Crime Victimization Survey*.

Second, research examining the presentation of race in crime stories has focused primarily on television news (Entman, 1990, 1992, 1994). Race is easily determined in television news stories because broadcast organizations need to provide video images (Ericson, Baranek, and Chan, 1991). The race of the suspect and the defendant is much more difficult to determine in newspaper stories because print organizations typically do not include racial identifiers in a story (Campbell, 1995; Chermak, 1995). For example, Chermak (1995:127) identified the race of the victim in only ten percent of the newspaper stories examined.

Third, it has been difficult to isolate the importance of race because the majority of crime content studies use descriptive statistics. Johnstone et al. (1994) used a particularly innovative approach to document the newsworthiness of African American victims, examining the presentation of homicide in two Chicago newspapers (the *Tribune* and *Sun-Times*). What is interesting about this study is that they had access to the total pool of homicides reported to the Chicago police in 1987, allowing them to examine the factors that determine which homicides were reported in the news and the amount of attention given to them.

Using logistic regression, Johnstone et al. found that the strongest predictor of whether a story was reported and its prominence was the number of victims murdered. Other significant predictors were the number of offenders and the method used to complete the murder. Moreover, these researchers found that the chances of a white murder victim being presented was much higher than for African-Americans or Hispanics, with ratios ranging between 2:1 and 4:1. They concluded: "[The results] do leave one with at least the impression that the metropolitan papers favor news, even homicide news, that involves whites rather than people of color" (Johnstone et al., 1994:867).

Wilbanks (1984) used a similar approach, but his results documenting the effects of race were different. Wilbanks clipped all articles presented in the Miami Herald discussing any of the 569 homicides that occurred in Dade County in 1980. He found that the best predictor of the number of articles and the number of column inches provided to a story was the incidents involving multiple victims. Although a large proportion of homicides of African American victims killed by white offenders were presented in the news (69.7%), race of victim did not have a significant effect on the number of column inches. Fewer articles, however, were devoted to homicides of Hispanic victims.

Research by Chermak (1995) indicates that the presentation of crime news can be affected by local crime rates. Reporters employed for news organizations in cities with significant murder rates, such as Miami or Chicago, have the luxury of choosing only the most sensational crimes, excluding a large number of murders. In the Johnstone et al. (1994:863) study, only twenty-five percent of the homicides that occurred in Chicago were given news space. If the seriousness of crime is as important a variable determining what crimes gets presented as past research indicates (Chermak, 1995; Graber, 1980; Marsh, 1989; Sheley and Ashkins, 1981), then one would expect that a larger proportion of homicides would be presented in cities with average or low murder rates. Moreover, news media with access to a smaller number of local homicides may provide a more representative picture of homicide. We examine the presentation of homicide in Indianapolis to determine whether crimes involving African American victims have increased news value in cities with lower homicide rates.

This research is also important because we use two different measures of media salience. Johnstone et al. examined two dependent measures. First, they examined the effects of a dichotomous report-no report measure. This measurement, however, may have underestimated the importance of some homicides. News personnel are given several opportunities to report a homicide as a case progresses into the criminal justice system. On a slow news day, for example, a sentencing hearing of a murder not previously presented might get coverage. The dichotomous measure used assigns a homicide that gets covered at every stage of the criminal justice process the same value as a homicide covered once.

Second, Johnstone et al. examined a prominence score of minimal, moderate, and major attention. Although the authors used rough estimates of the number of paragraphs to place a story in a category, they admit that it was a subjective assessment (Johnstone et al., 1994:871). Murder stories running under 3 paragraphs were placed in the minimal category, stories 4-12 paragraphs were in the moderate category, and stories above 12 paragraphs were placed in the major attention category. This measure may also underestimate the value of some homicides because murder stories provided a tremendous amount of attention (30 or 40 paragraphs) are assigned the same value of stories receiving a large amount of attention (13 paragraphs).

We examine a newspaper's presentation of all homicides known by a police department for an entire year. We attempt to build on previous research in this area by examining two different dependent measures of

media salience. Our first measure of media salience is the number of articles presented about a case, and the second is the actual number of words provided to a homicide. The primary hypothesis tested is that fewer newspaper articles and fewer words will be presented on murder cases involving African American victims compared to murder cases involving white victims.

METHODS

Data

There are two sources of data in our study. First we obtained information about all murders reported to the Indianapolis Police Department in 1995.¹ The department's homicide unit provided the data. The department in 1995 investigated a total of 106 murders.² The records included significantly more information than would be available through other sources, including the race, sex, and age of the victims and suspects in each case.

Information about the degree of media attention was obtained from a Lexus-Nexus search for the period of January 1995 through June 1996. We conducted a search of the Indianapolis Star; the city's largest daily. In order to identify relevant articles we searched the database for all occurrences of either the victim's or suspect's names. For each murder case, we obtained both the number of articles and the number of words devoted to that case. In order to validate these counts we reviewed each of the articles. There were 227 articles identified describing 1995 murders. These articles represented some 77,397 words.

Our decision to include only newspaper stories appearing before July 1996 may have introduced a bias towards cases occurring earlier in 1995. However, this bias would only be relevant if the race of homicide victims was different by time of year. In fact, no such differences occurred. Moreover, for eighty percent of the cases, all news coverage occurred within three months of the incident. Several data elements were obtained from the IPD homicide files. These data provide a portrait of murder in Indianapolis. First, we examine the demographics of victims and suspects according to police records. African-Americans are significantly involved in murder as both victims and suspects. Even though African-Americans represent only 25 percent of the city's population, they make up 75 percent of the victims and 60 percent of the suspects. This compares with U.S. population data in

which African-Americans account for 51 percent of murder victims, and 56 percent of murder offenders (FBI, 1996). Moreover, African-Americans were suspects in 70 percent of cases in which the victim was African American.³ Not surprisingly, most of the victims in the study are men ($N = 82$). The average age of suspects and victims is about thirty years old. The average number of articles written about these homicides was 2.2, and the number of words was about 760.

Analysis

Our analysis of these data had three stages, including a comparison of means, a measure of association for categorical variables, and multiple regression. To begin, we compare the means for the number of articles and words for several explanatory variables. Table one illustrates the results of this analysis. We observe some important results. First, there are relatively large differences between the categories of the number of victims, suspect's sex, victim's race, and victim's sex variables. For example, in those cases in which the victim is white the average number of articles written about that case was 2.7. For black victims the mean was 2.06.⁴ Interestingly, the means for the categories of suspect's race are almost identical. Cases involving female suspects result in an average of one additional article per case. The mean number of articles for multiple victim homicides was 3. Approximately two articles were written, on average, for single victim murders.

We observe that there are differences in the number of words written for all of the variables presented. More words were written about murders with multiple victims, African American suspects, female suspects, white victims, and female victims. Differences by race of victim mirrored the effect observed when the number of articles was used as the measure of salience. Approximately 930 words were published, on average, describing the murder of a white victim. In contrast, black victim homicides resulted in only 704 words.

We then move to an analysis of the relationships between the relevant categorical variables. In order to make our analysis consistent with prior research in this area we limit our attention to only that data obtained about victims.⁵ We examine the relationships between the number of articles (treated in this case as an ordinal discrete variable) and the victim's race, number of victims and victim's sex. We also include the GAMMA measure of association. The results of these analyses appear in Table two. As can be seen, there are relatively strong relationships suggested. For example, the

GAMMA statistic for the relationship between number of articles and victim race suggests that African American victims receive relatively less media attention and that we can improve our prediction of the number of articles by almost 32 percent simply by knowing the race of the victim. Of particular interest is the finding that of the seven cases in which there is no media attention, six involve an African American victim.

Table 1
Comparison of Means for Word and Article Measures

Demographic Characteristics	Words		Articles	
	Mean (SD)	N	Mean (SD)	N
Suspect's Race				
White	748.63 (521.24)	16	2.3 (1.3)	16
Black	830.16 (1324.20)	62	2.3 (2.3)	62
Unknown	581.21 (753.13)	24	1.9 (1.4)	24
Total	758.79 (1113.19)	102	2.2 (2.0)	102
Suspect's Sex				
Male	754.70 (1107.12)	74	2.2 (2.1)	74
Female	1554.00 (2182.99)	5	3.2 (2.8)	5
Total	805.29 (1195.78)	79	2.3 (2.2)	79
Victim's Race				
White	928.89 (1115.5)	25	2.7 (2.4)	25
Black	703.57 (1114.13)	77	2.1 (1.9)	77
Total	758.79 (1113.19)	102	2.2 (2.0)	102
Victim's Sex				
Male	721.20 (1094.5)	82	2.2 (2.1)	82
Female	912.95 (1203.82)	20	2.5 (1.7)	20
Total	758.79 (1113.19)	102	2.2 (2.0)	102
Number of Victims				
One	755.39 (1140.91)	93	2.2 (2.0)	93
Two	794.00 (820.91)	9	3.0 (1.8)	9
Total	758.79 (1113.19)	102	2.2 (2.0)	102

Table 2**Crosstabulations**

Number of Articles	By Victim's Sex			By Victim's Race			By Number of Victims		
	Male	Female	Total	White	Black	Total	One	Two	Total
0	7	-	7	1	6	7	7	-	7
1	32	7	39	6	33	39	37	2	39
2	22	6	28	8	20	28	25	3	28
3	10	2	12	4	8	12	12	-	12
4	3	3	6	4	2	6	4	2	6
5	2	-	2	-	2	2	1	1	2
6	2	1	3	1	2	3	2	1	3
7	-	1	1	-	1	1	1	-	1
8	2	-	2	-	2	2	2	-	2
9	1	-	1	-	1	1	1	-	1
12	1	-	1	1	-	1	1	-	1
Total	82	20	102	25	77	102	93	9	102
Gamma	0.232			-0.317			0.415		
Asymp.									
Std. Error	0.163			0.147			0.193		
T	1.338			-1.998			1.678		
Significance	0.181			0.046			0.093		

We also observe some differences by sex of victim. Of the seven cases in which there were no articles presented all involve male victims. Overall, female victims receive more media attention than males. Finally, we conducted separate multiple regression analyses using both the words and articles as dependent variables. Our process for conducting these analyses was somewhat unusual, and thus requires some explanation.

Most researchers use data from samples to estimate population parameters. They can thus use statistical significance as the principal criteria to respecify models. Our data, however, represents the entire population of cases. We therefore used substantive rather than statistical significance as the criteria used to exclude variables.⁶ In other words, we excluded variables whose explanatory power relative to the other variables in the equation was at or near zero. Table three illustrates the final models for the respective dependent variables.

Examining the model for words we can make several observations. First, the coefficient of determination is relatively low, suggesting that while these variables are related to the variation in the words variable, other variables have been omitted from the analysis. The regression coefficients are consistent with results of our prior analyses. We see, for example, that while controlling for the number of victims and victim's sex, a white victim is likely to receive, on average, 207 more words than an African American, and that a female victim would receive 163 words more than a male victim. There was little independent contribution of the number of victims variable, results that are different from the Johnstone et al. findings.

The analysis of the articles equation provided somewhat different results.⁷ The victim sex variable in this equation was near zero and was excluded. In the resulting model victim race and number of victims are important predictors of media exposure. A multiple victim homicide is likely to receive one more article, and an African American victim is likely to receive three-quarters of an article less compared to whites. The results for the number of victims variable in these two regression equations are difficult to explain considering the high correlation between the two measures. Perhaps the cases involving multiple victims were considered serious enough to result in coverage across several stages of the criminal justice process, but not important enough to ever be provided a significant amount of space. What is particularly interesting about the multiple victim homicides is that in all cases except one both victims were African American. Moreover, the one exception involved the murder of a white female and African American male that were living together.

Table 3

Regression Models for Words and Articles Measure

	Words			Articles		
Victim						
Characteristics	B	Beta	t	B	Beta	t
Victim's Sex	163.79	0.059	0.554	-	-	-
Victim's Race	-207.39	-0.081	-0.788	-.716	-.154	-1.551
Number of						
Victims	4.5	0.001	0.011	0.955	0.135	1.364
Constant	921.930		1.372	2.443		2.273
R ²	0.011			0.038		

DISCUSSION

Crime is a high priority news topic. Media organizations invest organizational and personnel resources to construct stories, and provide a large amount of space to present crime incidents. Research indicates that crime accounts for as much as twenty-five percent of the total news space (Graber, 1980), and, if more broadly defined to include acts of deviance and social control, accounts for about half (Ericson et al., 1991).

Murder is a staple news item. Although according to official reports it is the index offense least likely to occur, research indicates that murders procure the most media attention (Chermak, 1995; Graber, 1980). In a city such as Indianapolis, which has a relatively modest homicide rate, almost all of the murders are provided at least some media attention. For example, over 92 percent of the 1995 murders were presented in the news.

The total amount of news space available for crime, however, is not unlimited. Crime events are excluded because of these limits, but they also provide media personnel with discretion to decide the amount of coverage given to the incidents presented to the public. The 106 murders occurring in Indianapolis were not provided equal amounts of space. Female victims and female suspects, and murders affecting multiple victims, receive more attention. The influence of these variables is diminished, however, when controlling for the race of the victim. The results on the presentation of race support the devaluation hypothesis. News media treat murders of African-Americans as being less important than murders of white victims. News selection decisions, and how events are presented to the public, are driven by what is considered extraordinary. The results indicate that race plays an important role in the decision making processes of news personnel. Murders involving African-Americans, in general, are considered ordinary.

The limitations of our analysis, and the difficulties inherent in determining media effects, do not allow us to conclude that the devaluation of minorities in the processing of cases (e.g., the death penalty is less likely to be given to defendants murdering a minority) is caused by the media's presentation of murder. However, this research does support the conclusion that news organizations perpetuate the public's general devaluation of crimes involving African American victims by providing less attention to murders of African American victims.

Additional research is necessary in this area because of limitations of this study. First, the methodology used will have to be replicated in other cities. There is a large body of research documenting the presentation of crime relying on comparisons between media content and general measures

of crime, such as the *Uniform Crime Reports*. It is important to use more accurate measures of homicide to determine how close the media's presentation coincides with the realities of crime.

Second, the explanatory power of the regression equations was quite low. The size of our sample prevented us from including other control variables, such as the relationship between the victim and suspect. Future research will have to increase the sample size of the number of homicides examined to test alternative explanations and include additional variables. For example, it is important to test how interaction effects influence the presentation of murder in the news. Third, researchers should examine whether the types of information provided in murder stories vary by race of the victim. Entman's (1994:516) analysis of network television news found that the images presented reinforce whites' antagonism towards blacks. A similar analysis of newspaper images, when the race of the victim and suspect is known, is necessary.

The Kerner's Commission Report on Violence in the Media stressed the need to provide equal treatment to issues affecting African American communities. Research examining the news media's presentation of race, since the report's publication, has documented how these issues continue to be ignored. Instead, news organizations present stereotypical images of minorities, perpetuating racial myths (Campbell 1995). This research fills several gaps in the extant research, and produces a similar conclusion. Our results indicate that news media consider the murder of an African American victim less important than the murder of a white victim.

ENDNOTES

1. Indianapolis operates under a consolidated city-county government. However, the jurisdiction of the Indianapolis Police Department remains the same as prior to the consolidation.
2. We have excluded four cases from our analysis. Three cases involve Hispanic victims, and are thus not relevant to this study. A fourth excluded case involved the death of a cab driver. There was significant media attention devoted to this case, but most was related to the issue of the safety of taxis.
3. All references to suspects are based only on cases that the department listed as solved. We did not include those cases in which suspect information had been developed but the case remained under investigation.

4. The 5 percent trimmed means are 2.4 for whites and 1.8 for blacks. The medians are 2 for whites and 1 for blacks.
5. Of particular concern here is the loss of cases that results when unsolved cases (those with no suspects) are excluded.
6. Significance levels and confidence intervals can be used to compare the relative magnitude of the coefficients.
7. The correlation between articles and words was .92. Nonetheless the models differed when the alternative dependent variables were utilized.

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